

Inst Cancer Res, New York, NY; ⁴Pediatrics, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY; ⁵Department of Pediatrics, Pediatric Bone Marrow Transplant Service, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY

CMV infections cause significant morbidity & mortality, particularly among HLA mismatched HSCT recipients. Adoptive immunotherapy using donor derived CMV-Specific cytotoxic T-cells (D-CMV-CTLs) can treat CMV infection in such patients. However, D-CMV-CTLs cannot be generated for HSCT recipients from CMV seronegative donors, and generation of such T-cells (TC) from cord blood has been difficult. Furthermore, D-CMV-CTLs in recipients of HLA disparate HSCT maybe ineffective if the HLA allele restricting their cytotoxic activity is not shared between the donor and host. In these conditions, persistent CMV reactivation can be treated using pre-generated CMV-CTLs of defined epitope specificity and HLA restriction from third party donors.

Many HLA antigens (ags) have multiple allelic variants. We asked if TC specific for epitopes of CMVpp65 presented by one allelic variant might also recognize the same epitope presented by other variants of the same HLA ag. We characterized the epitope specificities and HLA restrictions of 105 CMV-CTLs generated and banked for a phase I clinical trial, plus 41 additional donors. CMV-CTLs in 37 HLA A0201⁺ donors were consistently responsive to the A0201 presented NLV epitope. These NLV responsive TC from HLA A0201⁺ donors were also cytotoxic against NLV loaded targets expressing HLA A0201, 0205 and 0206, but not HLA 0202, 0211 and 0220. In 13 donors expressing HLA B40, B44 and B42 ag, CMV-CTLs were responsive to the HERNGFTVL epitope when presented by APCs expressing any one of the following alleles: HLA B 4001, 4002, 4006, 4401, 4403 or 4202. Importantly, CTLs from any one of these donors were also cytotoxic against HERNGFTVL loaded targets bearing one each of these alleles. TC from 9 donors inheriting HLA B35, all elicited responses to the epitope EVQAIRETVE which could be presented by either HLA B3501, 3502, 3503, 3508 or 3511; each CTL line was also cytotoxic against EVQAIRETVE loaded targets bearing one of these HLA B35 alleles. Similar cross reactivity was demonstrated for the QYDPVAALF epitope which can be recognized when presented by HLA A2402, 2404 and A2407. In contrast, allelic variants for a given HLA class-II allele do not share epitope specific responses in all donors; e.g. T-cells responding to the FTSQYRIQGKL are cytotoxic against peptide loaded DRB1 1101 targets, but do not lyse FTSQYRIQGKL loaded DRB1 1104 targets; DRB1 1104 presents a different epitope VAALFFFDIDL.

Our findings indicate that certain immunodominant viral epitopes may be presented by multiple allelic variants of class-I HLA ags. These data suggest that HLA class-I restricted epitope specific CMV-CTLs from HLA disparate donors can be effective in recipients sharing certain allelic variants within the same class-I family. Thus, generation of a bank of CTLs responding to common immunodominant epitopes could also potentially be used for treatment of a broader patient population at risk for CMV.

Giuseppe Gaipa⁴, Daniela Belotti⁴, Paolo Perseghin⁴, Matteo Parma⁶, Enrico Pogliani⁶, Jose Golay², Chiara Capelli², Sara Cortellazzo⁷, Giovanna D'Amico⁷, Andrea Biondi⁴, Alessandro Rambaldi⁸, Ettore Biagi⁴. ¹HSCT pediatric unit, and Laboratory of Cell Therapy "S. Verri", San Gerardo Hospital, Monza, Italy; ²USC Hematology and Laboratory of Cell Therapy "G. Lanzani", Ospedali Riuniti, Bergamo (Italy); ³Pediatric Dept., M.Tettamanti Research Center, Monza, Italy; ⁴HSCT pediatric unit, and Laboratory of Cell Therapy "S. Verri", San Gerardo Hospital, Monza (Italy); ⁵HSCT unit, Bolzano (Italy); ⁶HSCT adult unit, San Gerardo Hospital Monza; ⁷"M.Tettamanti" Research Centre, Monza (Italy); ⁸USC Hematology and Laboratory of Cell Therapy "G. Lanzani", Ospedali Riuniti, Bergamo (Italy), Bergamo, Italy

Background: Conventional steroid treatment for graft versus host disease (GvHD) is effective for a limited number of patients (pts). The use of mesenchymal stromal cells (MSC) as second line of treatment has been reported with promising results. We assessed the safety and efficacy of MSC, in a prospective, multicenter, phase I study (EudraCT 2008-007869-23) for the treatment of steroid resistant grade II-IV GvHD.

Methods: MSC were obtained from bone marrow harvests of third party donors and expanded with platelet lysate. Primary endpoint of the study was safety. Secondary endpoints were response to MSC, overall survival (OS) and transplant-related mortality (TRM). Plasma levels of IL2Ralpha by ELISA were analyzed for enrolled pts.

Results: Between August 2009, and June 2012, 16 children and 31 adults were treated. The median dose of infused MSC was 1.5×10^6 cells per kg. Enrolled pts presented with acute GvHD in 37 cases, chronic overlap syndrome in 7, and chronic classic GvHD in 3 cases. 15 pts had grade II GvHD, 23 grade III and 9 grade IV, according to NIH criteria. In 17 cases GvHD involved a single organ. Pts were treated with a median of 3 MSC infusions. No significant side effects were registered. 30 patients (63.8%) showed a clinical response. 13 of them (27.6%) had a complete response and 17 (36.1%) a partial response to treatment. 22 over 30 responding pts did not require further lines of immunosuppression after MSC infusion. Response was more likely in pts exhibiting grade II GvHD versus those with severer grading (87.5% vs. 51.6%, $P = .02$) and in pts receiving MSC within 30 days from GvHD onset (75.9% vs. 43.7%, $P = .05$). Median follow up for this cohort is 200 days (range 30-1066). Responders show a significant lower TRM (10.0% vs. 88.2%, $P < .05$) and a better OS probability than non responders (23.3% vs. 88.2%, $P < .05$). When comparing responders vs non-responders, IL2Ralpha showed a statistically significant difference in terms of fold decrease ($p=0.027$), corroborating clinical results. Similarly, a significant trend of fold decrease ($p=0.058$) was observed when comparing responder patients receiving MSC within or after 30 days from GvHD onset, in line with clinical results.

Conclusions: This study confirms that MSC may represent a safe and effective treatment for patients with steroid-refractory GVHD. Plasmatic markers may help in monitoring of clinical response. We suggest to consider the use of MSC as early as possible, after steroid failure.

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Safe and Effective Treatment of Graft Versus Host Disease with Platelet Lysate-Expanded Mesenchymal Stromal Cells: A Prospective, Multicentric, Phase 1 Study

Giovanna Lucchini¹, Martino Intronà², Erica Dander³, Attilio Rovelli⁴, Adriana Balduzzi⁴, Daniela Valentina Longoni⁴, Fabio Pavan⁴, Francesca Masciocchi⁴, Alessandra Algarotti², Maria Caterina Mico², Anna Grassi², Sara Deola⁵,

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CD25+ Regulatory T CELL-Depleted Donor Lymphocyte Infusion for Relapse After Allogeneic Transplantation – A PHASE 1 Study

Sarah Nikiforow^{1,2}, Haesook Kim³, Grace Kao^{1,2}, Marie-Michele Sainvil², Sean M. McDonough², Philippe Armand^{1,2}, Vincent T. Ho^{1,2}, Edwin P. Alyea III^{1,2},

Corey Cutler^{1,2}, Jerome Ritz^{1,2}, Joseph H. Antin^{1,2}, Robert J. Soiffer^{1,2}, John Koreth^{1,2}. ¹Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA; ²Hematologic Malignancies, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA; ³Biostatistics and Computational Biology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA

Donor CD4⁺CD25⁺FOXP3⁺ regulatory T cells (Treg) are capable of suppressing immune-mediated graft-versus-leukemia (GvL) and graft-versus-host disease (GVHD) responses. We undertook a dose-finding phase 1 study of CD25-depleted donor lymphocyte infusions (DLI) to treat post-transplantation relapse.

Methods: 24 subjects with disease relapse after HLA-matched allogeneic transplantation (9 AML, 4 ALL, 4 HD, 2 MDS, 2 NHL) were enrolled. Patients had no evidence of GVHD, were on no systemic immunosuppressants, and had received no salvage chemotherapy in the 4 weeks preceding DLI. Donor lymphocytes were CD25⁺ depleted via the Clin-iMACS system (Miltenyi). Primary objectives were feasibility and safety. Secondary objective was response.

Results - Feasibility: 3 patients came off study for insufficient numbers of donor CD3⁺ cells or GVHD onset prior to DLI. In the remainder, 10 had persistent or progressive disease, 7 were in PR, and 4 were in CR at study entry. CD25-depleted DLI doses were 1x10⁷ CD3⁺ cells/kg (level 1; n=5) and 3x10⁷ CD3⁺ cells/kg (level 2; n=16). 8 DLIs were from unrelated donors, 13 from related donors. Median log-reductions of CD25⁺ and CD4⁺CD25⁺FOXP3⁺Treg cells in the infusion products were 1.24 (range 0.72–7.75) and 2.10 (range 1.17–6.46), respectively.

Safety: 16 of 21 subjects were evaluable for toxicity. In 3 evaluable subjects at DLI Level 1, there were no DLTs. Dose Level 2 was the MTD, with 1 case of fatal acute GVHD in 13 evaluable subjects. Among all subjects, rates of acute or chronic GVHD were 19% by 8 weeks and 38% by 1 year following DLI.

Response: Median follow-up is 29.5 months. All subjects at Dose level 1 had progressive disease at 8 weeks; 1 experienced extensive chronic GVHD. At Dose level 2, 8 subjects (50%) had a response (1 PR, 7 CR), including 6 who had evidence of disease at DLI. 6 subjects, including 5 responders, manifested GVHD by day 100. 1 year survival was 8/16 (50%) in the MTD cohort, with 4 of the initial 8 week responders still in CR. Median survival was 15.4 months.

Conclusions: Use of CD25⁺ Treg depleted DLI appears feasible, safe and capable of inducing GvL without excessive GVHD in hematologic malignancies relapsed after allo-transplantation. Its safety and preliminary efficacy is promising but needs future prospective evaluation.

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Increased BLNK and Syk in B Cells From Chronic Graft-Versus-Host Disease Patients: Identification of Novel Therapeutic Targets

Jessica L. Allen¹, George Fedorow², Jenna Wooten¹, Matthew Fore¹, Philip A. Roehrs³, Paul Armistead⁴, James Coghil⁵, Thomas C. Shea⁶, Kristy Richards⁷, Stephanie J. Lee⁸, Krista Rowe⁹, David Rizzieri¹⁰, Nelson J. Chao¹¹, Jonathan S. Serody¹², Stefanie Sarantopoulos¹. ¹Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; ²Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC; ³Division of Pediatric Hematology-Oncology and Bone Marrow and Stem Cell Transplant Program, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC; ⁴Hematology/Oncology, University of North Carolina, Chapel

Hill, NC; ⁵Division of Hematology-Oncology, Bone Marrow and Stem Cell Transplant Program, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC; ⁶Bone Marrow Transplant Program, Division of Medical Oncology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC; ⁷Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Institute for Pharmacogenomics and Individualized Therapy, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; ⁸Clinical Transplant Research, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle, WA; ⁹Division of Hematologic Malignancies and Cellular Therapy, Duke University Health System, Durham, NC; ¹⁰Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC; ¹¹Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC; ¹²Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC

In previous work, we found that CD27⁺ B cells from patients with chronic GVHD (cGVHD) are metabolically active and capable of constitutive IgG production via BAFF-associated pathways. As B Cell Receptor (BCR) signaling is vital for B cell survival and activation, we hypothesized that antigen engagement of BCR confers distinct signaling in potentially pathologic CD27⁺ B cells in human cGVHD. We first aimed to identify candidate genes using pathway-focused mRNA expression profiling of highly purified CD27⁺ and CD27⁻ B cell populations from 3 patients with cGVHD and 3 healthy individuals. A unique array signature was identified, confirming that circulating CD27⁺ B cells in cGVHD are distinct from healthy 'memory' B cells. Of the 89 genes examined, 3 transcripts were significantly increased in CD27⁺ B cells from patients with cGVHD compared to healthy individuals. B-cell linker protein (BLNK), downstream of BCR ligation, was significantly increased 5.5 fold (p=0.01) in CD27⁺ B cells from patients with cGVHD compared to CD27⁺ B cells in healthy individuals. BLNK was also increased 5-fold (p=0.001) in CD27⁻ B cells from patients with cGVHD compared to CD27⁻ B cells from healthy individuals. Intracellular flow cytometry verified that stimulation of BCR resulted in increased expression of BLNK protein in 3 healthy individuals at 36 (p=0.01) and 60 (p=0.03) hours. To extend these findings to patients with cGVHD compared to patients without cGVHD we studied purified, un-manipulated CD19⁺ B cells from 10 HSCT patients who were >12 months post-transplant and off high dose steroid. cGVHD (n=4) B cells had significantly increased protein expression of BLNK (p=0.005) compared to B cells from patients without cGVHD (n=6). The protein kinase Syk, upstream of BLNK, was also significantly increased in B cells from cGVHD patients (p=0.01) compared to B cells from patients without disease. These data suggest that B cells in cGVHD are hyper-responsive to antigen (Table 1). To determine if B cells traffic to lesional tissue, liver biopsies were immunohistochemically analyzed in 3 patients with cGVHD. Two of 3 patients with disease had detectable CD27⁺ and CD27⁻ B cells in the liver while 2 reference biopsies from acute hepatitis patients, without cGVHD, did not. This affirms that BCR-activated B cells can be found at cGVHD disease sites. Increased expression of BLNK and Syk in B cells from patients

Table 1

BLNK and Syk are increased in B cells from patients with cGVHD

Phenotype	BLNK (MFI) Median ± SE	P-value	Syk (MFI) Median ± SE	P-value
Without cGVHD (n=6)	3.67 ± 0.14		13.85 ± 0.28	
With cGVHD (n=4)	4.52 ± 0.15	0.005	16.50 ± 1.20	0.013

cGVHD, chronic GVHD; MFI, Mean Fluorescence Intensity.